

## **NEW REBEL CAMPS ALONG SINO-MYANMAR FRONTIER**

BY

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Camps belonging to separatist rebel outfits from the Northeast have surfaced in a remote region in northern Myanmar along the country's border with China. The available evidence suggests that at least two organisations – the anti-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and People's Liberation Army ( of Manipur) – have stepped up their activities along a certain stretch of the border between the twin countries since the past few years.<sup>1</sup> This development is the outcome of a combination of factors including the subtle transformation of the political situation in Myanmar's Sagaing Division where the insurgent outfits have had a presence for more than three decades. It illustrates the continuing scope that the neighbouring country provides for such activities and the possibility of the separatist campaign dragging in the Northeast in the near future.

Reports about these camps have been occasionally carried in the media for the past several years. Very often they were attributed to ULFA but the presence of PLA was hardly known.<sup>2</sup> But there was clinching evidence last April when ULFA chief of staff Paresh Baruah invited a journalist working for a local news channel in Guwahati for an interview. The video footage showed Baruah speaking to the reporter Chaya Moni Bhuyan in a room which does not look like a camp. His statements were a repetition of his earlier views and he insisted that talks with the Indian government would be possible only if Assam's "sovereignty" was accepted as the "core issue" of the discussion which New Delhi is unlikely to accept. After her return to Guwahati from the

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assignment in the third week of April, Bhuyan has been quizzed by the Special Branch of Assam Police.

The reporter had met Baruah in Myanmar very close to the country's border with China's southwestern province of Yunnan. The interview was given at a guest house of ULFA which is about 20 kms north of the camp established some years ago and located close to Ruili and Yinjiang across the border in Yunnan.<sup>3</sup> In Myanmar, the region is in Shan State but under the effective control of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) which was an offshoot of the Communist Party of Burma in 1989 when it collapsed and splintered. Unlike its predecessor, UWSA chose not to fight with the government and instead signed the ceasefire agreement with the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar armed forces) in the same year and a fragile peace has since been established in the hills of Shan State.

Among the rebel groups, it was the PLA that blazed the trail to the Wa region in the mid-1980s around the same time when it was being trained by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Myanmar. Its objective was to reestablish links with the Chinese authorities for procuring weapons and logistical support for the separatist campaign in the Northeast and in the process, it managed to open an unofficial liaison office at Yunnan's Ruili.<sup>4</sup> Since then, PLA's top functionaries have been frequenting Yunnan and Shan State at regular intervals and its chairman Irengbam Bhorot Chaoren had also visited other cities in China on several occasions for meetings with Chinese officials.<sup>5</sup> For a long time, it was only the PLA among all the rebel outfits in the Northeast that was able to maintain links with the Chinese authorities. At least three other outfits – NSCN, ULFA and UNLF – had also tried to forge links but without success.<sup>6</sup>

ULFA's tryst with the Wa region can be traced back to 1988 months after its first batch landed in Kachin for training. When the training was on, chief of staff Baruah and a few senior cadres also visited Shan State and Ruili in their quest for weapons and explosives but without success.<sup>7</sup> Links with the UWSA were still not established and the Chinese authorities were not eager to assist the rebels. ULFA had to rest content with whatever weapons they received

from the KIA which mainly included G-3 and M-20 rifles and pistols. It was not until 2008 that a connection was forged with the UWSA after Baruah evinced his desire to set up a camp before the leadership.<sup>8</sup> The reason was the volatile condition in Bangladesh where the entire leadership of the organisation was based. New Delhi had been piling pressure on Dhaka to apprehend the militants and there was a need for a safer hideout beyond the reach of the Indian government. (However, except Baruah who managed to slip out to China and then to the Wa region, all the other senior functionaries of the ULFA were apprehended by the Rapid Action Battalion in Bangladesh and handed over to India)

The situation in the Wa hills had drastically altered by the time Baruah had landed to set up a camp. The conditions had only become more favourable for militant activities in the region. The UWSA exercised absolute control in the region and *Tatmadaw* was not too bothered to challenge the Wa domination due to disturbed conditions in other parts of the country. The lack of government control in the Wa hills facilitated two developments with long term implications. Since 1989, the UWSA has emerged as the leading producers of heroin and methamphetamine in the world. The US blacklisted the organisation in 2013, but the production of drugs has only registered an upward trend over the years. And second, China has begun to cultivate UWSA as an ally and it has even sold sophisticated military hardware like armoured personnel vehicles and anti-aircraft guns to the organisation. Beijing's objective was to send a message to Naypyidaw that it would not tolerate its commercial and strategic interests being jeopardised in the country.<sup>9</sup> China has long term commercial and strategic interests in the country and it was alarmed after Myanmar began to draw closer to the West, Japan and India in the past few years.

According to a section of government officials, the proximity of the Chinese authorities to UWSA and the rebel groups was a factor that contributed to the establishment of the camps in the Wa region. Already there were reports of interaction between the Second Department – an intelligence agency under the People's Liberation Army (of China) – and top leaders of some rebel organisations from the Northeast including the ULFA and PLA. In 2011,

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national security adviser and former director of Intelligence Bureau Ajit Doval provided lurid details about the meetings between top functionaries of some of these outfits from the Northeast and Chinese intelligence officials. He says that in October, 2007, on the invitation of Chinese authorities, Anthony Shimray who headed the foreign affairs cell of NSCN (IM), visited China and held meetings with two senior intelligence officials – Lee Wuen and Chang – at Yunnan. A letter from NSCN (IM) general secretary Thuingaleng Muivah to the Chinese authorities given by Shimray mentioned the appointment of Kholose, a Sema Naga from Zunheboto, as their permanent representative in China. While welcoming the “institutionalized arrangement”, the intelligence sleuths wanted the Nagas to keep them informed through Kholose about the movements of the Indian Army, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, activities of Dalai Lama and Tibetans in India and about the progress of the peace talks with the Indian government. The Chinese also tasked them to keep track of other NE insurgent groups and the progress of their peace parleys with India. One of the major responsibilities of Kholose was procurement of weapons from China. Two years later, even the chairman of the outfit Isak Chisi Swu visited China after the visa was arranged by the Chinese authorities in Philippines. High level meetings were held and efforts were also made to expedite the supply of weapons from the South Chinese port of Beihei to Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh for the NSCN (IM). Doval further reveals about ULFA chief of staff Paresh Baruah’s visit to China in 2010 and the subsequent training of a batch of 80 cadres at Ruili.<sup>10</sup>

There is hardly any doubt that China has changed its policy towards the separatist groups in the Northeast in the past few years. Most of what Doval wrote about these links has been corroborated from sources in the militant outfits except the training of ULFA cadres in Ruili which is extremely doubtful. In all probability, the Chinese would never assist the rebels so blatantly and provide evidence to New Delhi. ULFA cadres have been surrendering at regular intervals ever since it originated in the early 1980s. A confessional statement by any rebel cadre about such activities could put Beijing in a tight spot. Moreover, if at all China were to get involved in training ULFA cadres, it would probably organise the facility in the Wa region since it enjoys excellent relations with the UWSA.

In the 1990s and subsequent years, a majority of the batches belonging to the separatist groups in the Northeast were trained at Sagaing Division in Myanmar in the region under control of the NSCN (K). Besides ULFA and PLA, there are other outfits such as the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), etc that have established training facilities in the region.<sup>11</sup> The origin of the relationship between the Northeast and Myanmar rebels can be traced to the mid-1960s when the Naga National Council (NNC) sought the assistance of Naga rebels across the border to reach China.<sup>12</sup> The ties received a boost after the formation of the NSCN in 1980 which for the first time brought the Nagas on both sides of the border on a common platform. The PLA and UNLF from Manipur had already pitched tent in Myanmar when the first group of six ULFA cadres reached the NSCN Council headquarters in 1983.<sup>13</sup> Confusion arose when the NSCN split eight years later and Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah forced to leave Myanmar with their supporters. ULFA and all the Manipuri groups decided to remain loyal to Myanmar based S S Khaplang who soon became the chief of NSCN (K).

Camps and cadres proliferated in Myanmar after 1988, but there was continuous hostility with the Myanmar army. The army would often raid villages and destroy the camps forcing the militants to shift to new locations in the hills. On some occasions, the rebels also retaliated inflicting heavy losses on the army.<sup>14</sup> It was not until 2001 that normalcy was restored after a mutual understanding was arrived at between the Nagas and the army and which explains why the repeated pleas by New Delhi to demolish the camps have fallen on deaf ears.<sup>15</sup> *Tatmadaw* would never prefer to open another hostile front with the Nagas at a time when other regions in Myanmar are simmering. Waging a war in Sagaing Division would involve marshalling an enormous amount of resources since there is hardly any infrastructure like roads and electricity. Therefore, it is not surprising that the army has preferred to turn a blind eye to the activities of the rebels. The groups from the Northeast were secured and they had no reason to be concerned about being evicted by force. However, the situation in Sagaing Division began to undergo subtle changes from 2012 as a result of a series of developments which began

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with a formal ceasefire agreement between the NSCN (K) and the Myanmar army.<sup>16</sup>

In fact the groups were planning to form not only an alliance among themselves but also a government-in-exile for a greater punch to the separatist campaign in the Northeast. The top leaders of all the nine outfits present in Sagaing Division were supposed to have met at Taga in Hukwang Valley on 30 December 2011 for a meeting to give shape to the coalition but the conclave was cancelled due to security reasons.<sup>17</sup> According to earlier plans, all the groups would be part of the alliance and their goal would be the independence of the Northeast and the contiguous Naga inhabited territory in Myanmar. But the process was delayed for lack of consensus on some vital issues including leadership with some Manipuri groups like the UNLF proposing the name of its chairman Rajkumar Meghen alias Sana Yaima as the chairman of the front who is currently in jail in Guwahati.<sup>18</sup> It took more than three years for the alliance to be formed which was named United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSEA). But only four organisations assumed membership of the front which included the anti-talks faction of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), ULFA and NSCN (K).<sup>19</sup> The six Manipuri outfits that have camps in the vicinity of all these groups had abstained from joining the alliance.

Even as efforts were being made to stitch the alliance, Khaplang initiated the process of drawing closer to *Naypyidaw*. He is advancing in age and perhaps aware that there could be a tussle for the top positions in NSCN (K) after his demise which could even fuel inter-tribal conflicts. It is quite possible that he would like to further stabilise the Naga region by beginning the process of integration with the Myanmar mainstream. He decided to abrogate the ceasefire with the Indian Government towards the end of March which was inked in 2001. There was hardly any progress in the talks except the annual extension of the ceasefire agreement. New Delhi was reluctant to begin talks with a rebel chief who was based in Myanmar and who was a bitter rival of the NSCN (IM). Khaplang saw greater benefits in befriending *Naypyidaw* and maintaining a distance from the Indian government. By terminating the

agreement, NSCN (K) has demonstrated its loyalty to the Myanmar Government and its commitment to the separatist groups from the North-East. These events were followed by two operations in Nagaland and Manipur by the rebels between May–June 2015 that resulted in the killing of at least 26 soldiers from the Assam Rifles and Indian Army. At the same time, the Naga chief has succeeded in convincing *Naypyidaw* that his demand of independence of the Naga inhabited region and the alliance with the other rebel outfits would not jeopardise the long-term interests of Myanmar.<sup>20</sup>

As further evidence of its goodwill and intentions, NSCN (K) participated in the negotiations last year with the Myanmar government to explore the possibility of a nation-wide ceasefire agreement. The Nagas were not a signatory to the pact that was subsequently inked by eight groups due to last minute hitches and especially due to disagreements over who the process should include and the ongoing distrust of Myanmar's semi-civilian government and its still-powerful military. But this has not tarnished the relationship between the Naga group and the government. Last year, government officials were seen in several Naga villages distributing solar panels in the Konyak region close to the border with India which definitely marks a reversal of the earlier policy of *Naypyidaw*.<sup>21</sup> Development of the Naga inhabited area had never been the priority of the government which explains why it remains one of the last unexplored frontiers in the world.

There are also unconfirmed reports that *Naypyidaw* has firmed up plans for a military cantonment at Taga where the headquarters of all these outfits are located. These recent developments do not augur well for the separatist groups from India's Northeast that have camps and cadres in the Naga region of Myanmar. Like the Wa hills, lack of government presence had helped these outfits to fortify their base in the country's Sagaing Division. They were allowed to pitch tent by NSCN (K) since their presence was a force-multiplier and strong deterrent against the Myanmar army. But with the equations now changing between the NSCN (K) and *Naypyidaw*, it was imperative for the Northeast rebels to explore safer areas. Myanmar is the last refuge of these groups and there is no other country they can turn to – Bhutan had eliminated all rebel camps in 2003 and Bangladesh had also begun cracking

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the whip on the militants ever since the Awami League government assumed power more than seven years ago in Bangladesh. Besides the Wa controlled region in Shan State, there are also reports that a few Manipuri groups have set up camps in Chin State adjacent to Mizoram.

With the winds of change blowing fast in Myanmar, it may be too early to surmise the impact of these developments on the Northeast. Nonetheless, two conclusions can be safely arrived at given the current situation in the neighbouring country and the activities of the separatist outfits. First, there is still space in Myanmar for new rebel camps and the possibility of them expanding with training facilities cannot be ruled out in the near future. As events in the past few years have proved, it may be difficult to convince *Tatmadaw* to swing into action against the rebels and eliminate their bases. But whether there will be a change in the trajectory of the separatist campaign in the Northeast remains to be seen. Insurgency related incidents have registered a downward trend in the region in the past decade or so and a majority of the insurgent outfits are aspiring for a negotiated settlement with the government. And secondly, the separatist outfits are in no mood to lay down their weapons and renounce their campaign of independence even if that means setting up camps in more remote and inaccessible regions. A journey from the camps along the Sino-Myanmar frontier to the entry points in the Northeast could take as many as four weeks, and it would mean crossing the Chindwin River and traversing inhospitable mountainous regions through the Sagaing Division on foot. Therefore, occasional ambushes and encounters with the security forces might continue for some time. There are still enough rebel cadres for low-intensity warfare, ample scope for uninterrupted flow of weapons and external forces willing to sustain these conditions.

#### END NOTES

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3. Telephone conversation with a joint secretary of Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW), 20 January 2016 and a retired brigadier of Military Intelligence (MI), 5 March 2016 who spoke on condition of anonymity
4. Interview with a PLA commander, Imphal, 24 September 2007 and Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier*, New Delhi, HarperCollins Publishers, 2012, p 160
5. Interview with a PLA commander, Imphal, 24 September 2007
6. Ibid
7. Interview with former ULFA functionaries Lohit Deuri, Guwahati, 20 January 2011 and Bimal Haloi, Nalbari, 1 February 2016
8. Interview with former ULFA functionaries, Tinsukia, 10 – 15 January 2015
9. Anthony Davis, State of Wa, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 20 December 2012
10. <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2011/january/31/China-Factor-in-North-East-Insurgency-Alarming-Signals> (retrieved 15 May 2016)
11. Rajeev Bhattacharyya, *Rendezvous With Rebels: Journey to Meet India's Most Wanted Men*, New Delhi, HarperCollins Publishers, 2014, p 90-91
12. Interview with NSCN (K) chairman S S Khaplang, *Taga (Myanmar)*, 23-24 December 2011
13. Interview with ULFA general secretary Anup Chetia, Guwahati, 14 May 2016
14. Interview with former ULFA functionary Satabda Kumar, Sivasagar, 18 November 2014
15. Rajeev Bhattacharyya, *Rendezvous With Rebels: Journey to Meet India's Most Wanted Men*, New Delhi, HarperCollins Publishers, 2014, p 201
16. Ibid, p 286
17. Ibid, p 247
18. <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/common-platform-insurgent-groups-northeast-unlwf-worry-government> (retrieved 10 May 2015)

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19. Joint press release by National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K), United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), mailed to media houses on 4 May 2015. A copy of the release is available with the author.
20. Telephone conversation with a senior NSCN (K) functionary who spoke on the condition of anonymity, 22 August 2015
21. Telephone conversation with a senior NSCN (K) functionary who spoke on the condition of anonymity, 10 November 2015.

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